



EXPERT INSIGHT

customer advocate

Sam Bruni, Director of Customer Experience, Backcountry.com

Gear Heads Get Chatty About the Outdoors—and It Pays

Sam Bruni explains how the online retailer of high-end outdoor gear and apparel enhanced the customer experience to hike up the bottom line.

Backcountry.com's mission is to become the best outdoor gear store on the Web. We will accomplish this goal by offering the best products, services, website, and customer fulfillment in the world. Everything we do in each of those areas is centered on the customer, but a successful customer experience also requires a successful employee experience.

Our proactive online chat capability has played a significant role in enhancing both the customer and employee experience. In fact, our satisfaction and revenue measures demonstrate that our use of the LivePerson online chat application enhances the customer experience. And our increased employee satisfaction shows that it also improves the employee experience—something that starts with finding the right people.

We hire people who are passionate about skiing, snowboarding, and other outdoor sports—inquiries are routed according to skills: skiers chat with skiers, snowboarders interact with fellow boarders—train them extremely well, and foster an enjoyable working environment. When hiring for chat-focused positions, we also search for gear heads who prefer to type rather than to speak on the telephone.

In the past our "Gear Head for a Day" training initiative cycled all employees through our customer service function for a day. The program evolved into our current "New Hire Experience," in which all new employees—regardless of their position—spend a week in the customer service department. By end of the week they handle customer calls, chats, or emails themselves.

After a period of initial service our 32 current gear heads can work at home, which enables them to spend more time on the slopes. We support home-based gear heads with a team of in-office "gear gurus," who respond to gear heads' questions via instant message (IM).

Keys to Success

Backcountry.com's live chat works well because the company:

- **Keeps chatters happy:** "Gear heads" work from home, so have more time to use the gear and apparel.
- **Provides support:** On-site "gear gurus" provide support to gear heads via instant messaging.
- **Tracks the right metrics:** The retailer measures acceptance rates, sales conversion rates, customer satisfaction, and the chat's impact on the buying decision.
- **Keeps it real:** The company does not crimp its gear heads' style, passion, or knowledge with rules on chat length, spelling, or grammar.

For example, a home-based gear head can IM a gear guru to ask whether a specific jacket has zippered pockets. The gear guru will step into the warehouse, find the item, and respond. This support has almost eliminated the need for escalation while enabling seamless customer support.

Besides offering discounted ski passes, products at cost, and other traditional forms of appreciation, we also enhance the employee experience through a wiki-based intranet we call The Goat. All employees can edit any page on The Goat to contribute their ideas and opinions on any issue, project, or strategy. If, for example, a vendor places restrictions on the sale of certain products outside the United States, the first employee who receives that information updates the vendor page. Any employee can tag a wiki for updates so that he's informed via email any time information relevant to his responsibilities changes.

Nice call, bro!

We track a large collection of metrics, including chat length, conversion rates (where appropriate, as some chats are service-specific), average shopping cart size, and satisfaction rates as determined by automated post-chat surveys. However, we do not place limits on chat length. That's the wrong place to strive for efficiency. We gain efficiency through the fact that our gear heads can conduct up to three different chats simultaneously.

We also constantly reexamine the rules we use to determine when and where to present the offer to chat. For example, to enhance service involving the returns process, we have created rules to launch a live-chat invite when customers visit the guarantee section of our sites.

Although managers monitor chat transcripts, we give our gear heads the freedom to be themselves. Our training focuses on understanding how to establish an effective tone in their writing. We want their enthusiasm to inspire our customers, and creating policies about perfect punctuation, spelling, and time limits might curb that enthusiasm.

Our customers remain enthusiastic about chatting with our gear heads, too: 87 percent of customers who chat with our service representatives, or "gear heads," say they are satisfied with the experience, and 85 percent say the experience inspired them to make a purchase. In 2007 we increased our chat traffic, and all the benefits that accompany it, by 12 percent. > *As told to Eric Kroll*

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ONLINE EXTRA: To listen to the full interview with Bruni, go to www.1to1media.com/links/bruni.html



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